

THE MAN WHO
KILLED HITLER



"The Man who Killed Hitler" is fiction, but it is written with power and intensity that give it the realism of truth. All of it could happen. At the end you will wonder—"Did it really happen?" and whose is the Hidden Hand that is striking against it?

THE MAN WHO KILLED HITLER

ANONYMOUS



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CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

SOMEWHERE in the Reich there was a man who would kill Hitler.

Dr. Karl Moeller first knew it from the savage seed planted in his mind when polished Nazi boots kicked his wife to death in the Ringstrasse gutter.

The Reich, a bitter thought; Austria, a part of the Reich, was already swallowed by the black plague from Berlin. Seven days ago the Anschluss had darkened Vienna's friendly face, tattooed it with swastika marks, trampled it with marching feet. The city's dying voice was lost in a chorus of roaring *Heils*. There was death—in the conquest of an old proud people; there was life—in the cries of that consuming infant spawned by Hitler.

Dr. Moeller could look down upon Hietzing, Vienna's ancient suburb, from the high window of

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his supervisory office in the Steinhof Sanatorium.

Around him, like mushrooms in a field of tall shrubs, were studded the little white cottages of his sick children; for they were children, young and old, whose faltering minds were in his hands. It was quiet here, unlike the seething streets of town, and his patients roamed the hospital grounds not knowing of that other madness in the land.

"It is a madness," Dr. Moeller thought, "and soon it will join the other delusions in this place, and laugh at all our skill. They probably suspect me now. . . ."

Dr. Moeller's brooding was broken by a muffled rap on the door of the soundproof office. He gave a little start, a dreamer caught unawares, and swung around. A white-coated orderly poked a clipped head through the doorway.

"Pardon, Herr Doktor, but the patient Henrath——"

"What has he done now?"

"He got away again, Herr Doktor . . ." hesitantly. "He had smashed two of our chapel windows when we caught him."

Dr. Moeller nodded and raked over the dark shadow of his chin with sharp, thin fingers.

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"Yes, yes, of course," he said. "Henrath would do that . . . he hates that which he fears."

"Shall we give him morphine?"

"No." Dr. Moeller pulled a cotton handkerchief from the pocket of his long starched coat, and slowly wiped the lens of his thin glasses. His hands were shaking. "No sedative yet," he said. "Perhaps we can quiet him without that."

"As you say, Herr Doktor. Any other orders for the Ward?"

"No other orders, thank you. Wait——" Dr. Moeller called out. "Tell me, how is the staff to-day? Is there much unrest . . . ?"

Dr. Moeller wished he had not asked. The orderly stiffened and his smile made faint commas on his fat cheeks. "There is no unrest," he said, "among free men. The Führer has come back to his own people and shown us the way."

Ah . . . so it had come, so soon.

"Yes," he said. "Among free men . . ."

"That is all, Herr Doktor?"

"Yes."

The door closed noiselessly and the psychiatrist realized he had not heard the usual "Heil Hitler." The Steinhof's peaceful halls would be ringing with it in another day . . . two days, perhaps.

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And only the mad patients would not know what it meant.

Dr. Moeller went back to the window. It drew him like a silent voice which only his tortured mind could hear. Long ago, before a frustrated corporal emerged from his defence mechanisms and became Hitler, the dictator, Dr. Moeller used to look from his window and watch new patients walk up to the gates. Sometimes they were alone, sometimes under guard—but he always learned something in that off-stage appraisal. There was a language in their walk, the way their arms swung, the thrust of their chins, the droop in their mouths. He could almost name their psychoses before they came to his office for that first and important talk.

But now these montage pictures were gone—there remained only two that were sharp and clear.

One was of a man he had seen shuffling up the tree-fringed Steinhofstrasse toward the hospital long, long ago. Dr. Moeller had watched him. He was pulling on the thin ends of a long moustache, and there was a warp around his mouth that wrote its own diagnosis: persecution complex. But the man did not turn into the Steinhof. He

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strode on toward the ivy-fringed castle in Schoenbrunn Park, a kilometre distant, and the puny slope of his shoulders disappeared amongst the rustling lindens. "There goes a man who should be here," Dr. Moeller had said to himself. "He is not well in mind."

The years rolled on, and Dr. Moeller would see him again, for he never forgot a face. This time the moustache would be a short black smudge. The shoulders would be higher, in the folds of a brown shirt, and a forelock would be dangling over one eye. . . .

The window whispered, too, of Greta, his wife.

He had last seen her when she stepped lightly down the long walk, her small heels clicking like castanets against the stone. She had turned to wave, and there was a smile on her proud little face.

"Where are you going, *lieblich*?" he had asked as she was leaving the office.

"To market, to market to buy a fat pig . . ."

"Nonsense," he laughed. "No housewife goes to market singing."

"Oh, Karl," she said, laughing, "husbands shouldn't know so much about a woman's mind. I'm going shopping, of course. To the Ringstrasse for a hat. . . ."

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"A hat? For spring?"

"Yes, *lieblich*."

"Get a yellow one," he said, pressing her hand. "I like yellow . . . clean and fresh, like the *oster-glocken* flowering down there in the grounds."

"I'd rather get a blue one to match your eyes," she said, teasing, "but yellow it shall be." She reached up like a little brown bird and kissed the soft place under his ear—and then she was gone.

He never saw Greta again.

She went down to the winding Ringstrasse and came upon turmoil; she found men and women driven by a current whipped to a froth. It roared through the streets with no banks to spill its overflow. The streaming surface was flecked with black and brown shirts and visored caps. She saw the faces of her own Jewish race, some frightened, some bold, and the buildings threw back the dreaded cry: "*Tod den Juden*. . . . Death to the Jews."

Greta Moeller's voice rose above the cascade of sound. "Is this the justice Hitler promised his people when he left Austria? We have done nothing! We love peace!" Her challenge was only a thin trumpet of courage, heard by men with swastikas on their sleeves.

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"Be still, Jewess!" one of them said. "You are foolish to be here. You should stay home."

"Home?" Greta answered, suddenly quiet. "This is home. . . ."

"Get out," the brownshirt said. He was not used to dealing with women, and the confusion of duty was written across his pink young face.

"I have a right to speak," she said gently. "I have seen more years than you! The people will outlive their soldiers. Your Hitler is no longer of Austria. Your Hitler cannot——"

"Heil Hitler!" the youth cried. And because they had not taught him other ways to still a disturbing tongue, he knocked her down.

Blood always incites more blood. The flare of a match, the splutter of a fuse . . . and Greta Moeller sprawled in the gutter, smiling, with the boots of men thudding against her small body. She smiled until blood spurted out through her teeth and that last kick silenced her voice.

They told Karl Moeller about it that night, after he had spent frantic hours along the Ringstrasse, stumbling from shop to shop asking for the "brown-eyed girl who bought a yellow hat." But she was gone, and so was her body. The Nazis would dump it into a pit far from prying eyes.

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It was not good for grieving men to see such things, and quicklime would burn and melt a face that might be found.

Greta's Aryan husband had become a marked man.

Those first appalling days left Dr. Moeller without ordered channels of thought.

Grief he would not wear. This thing that had happened to him was beyond the trivial dignity of open sorrow. But other emotions he could embrace and analyse, and he realized again, as he had so many times, how thin was the thread of sanity. They had killed his wife and stamped him with the crime of having loved a Jew. They would watch him, and wait.

He was alone, walking in Schoenbrunn, when he first thought that someone should kill Hitler.

He had to come there, under the friendly rustling arms of the beeches and oaks. He could talk to the sky and the silent green-hemmed paths—and to her.

The dead kings of Austria had scuffed the gravel of these same narrow walks, perhaps with like rebellion in their souls. There were straight paths elsewhere as obvious and pleas-

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as these. There were only two beyond the Steinhof—the path of mania, trod by Hitler; the path of grim purpose toward Hitler. The two must meet.

Sometimes the grieving doctor turned his searching eyes toward the white coxcomb of the Wiener Wald range. So many times he had come to Schoenbrunn with problems, and the silent brow of the mountains, unchanging, cooled his thoughts. He would leave the park, plod back to the Steinhof Chapel, and kneel under its golden dome until sundown purpled the high windows.

The cloister was there, he used to say, “because tortured minds, like those we nurse, need spiritual help.” He needed it now, more than any of his patients.

And so he had to go back to his office, and he told himself, “stop thinking . . . stop thinking. There is no Hitler . . . no Hitler. Only you. Time is your therapy.”

Dr. Moeller plumped himself into the swivel chair before his desk, pushed a button marked: “Dr. Franzel.”

The door swung open in a moment, and Dr. Moeller looked up at a tall young man whose hair

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was almost as light as his crisp linen smock.

"Good morning, Erich," he said.

"Good morning, Herr Doktor. Did you rest well last night?"

"Rest?" A wistful smile brushed across Dr. Moeller's lips. "It is a nice word. . . ."

The younger man's face mirrored concern. "Perhaps you should take a trip . . . new surroundings for a while."

"A familiar prescription, my boy," Dr. Moeller said. "It might not be a bad plan if I could go to Berlin."

"Berlin? But why there, Herr Doktor?"

Dr. Moeller shrugged and looked out the window again. "An idle whim," he said. "I cannot go anywhere; they will see to that. But you—you should be in Berlin."

Franzel's eyes clouded and a frown cut across his forehead. "You talk in riddles to-day," he said.

"They want Nordics like you in Berlin," Dr. Moeller said doggedly. "They would like your Aryan brow, your lemon hair, your blue eyes. Yes, the Nazis would like you."

"Pardon, Herr Doktor . . ." Franzel was uncomfortable and suspicion was taking shape in

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his mind. Dr. Moeller had moped strangely these past days, and Franzel had struggled to keep friendship and professional judgment apart. Sudden grief and shock sometimes——

"I'm sorry, Erich," Dr. Moeller said. "You must excuse my wanderings. Now, what is the schedule?"

Franzel stirred uneasily. "There is a new case from Linz. The man belonged to the secret brownshirts."

"A Nazi? Here?" The blood drained from Dr. Moeller's face.

"This one is a patient," Dr. Franzel quickly reminded. "Paranoiac. He is harmless. Here are his papers."

Dr. Moeller leaned back in his chair.

"All right, Erich. Bring him in."

Franzel bowed and went out.

The first brownshirt in the Steinhof. . . . There must have been secret Nazis there before Anschluss, hiding their guilty thoughts, or boldly wearing the tell-tale white stockings. But when Hitler struck they sprang up by magic, like Jason's murderous teeth. A miserable, dangerous crop. Now everyone was Nazi.

Dr. Moeller was glancing through the new

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patient's admittance papers when the door swung wide and he heard Franzel's discreet cough. Dr. Moeller's weariness suddenly flowed away. Nazi or no Nazi, here was his life's work. He smiled, and the familiar pattern of duty wrapped itself around him as friendly and comfortable as an old coat.

"Good morning, my friend."

The patient stood, his arm stiff. "Heil Hitler!"

"Sit down," Dr. Moeller said quietly. The ramrod figure did not stir. Only his arm dropped down, like a crossing signal after the train has passed. "Very well," the psychiatrist said softly. "You may stand. We hope you will be happy here . . . Herr," glancing at the papers, "Herr Severin Braun. That is your name . . . yes?"

"No!" The voice was guttural.

"Who are you, then?"

Again defiance. "You will know later. And you will not like it!"

Dr. Moeller's eyes swept the man's impassive face. Paranoia? If so, it was wearing an ominous, puzzling shell. The new arrivals were not always so brusque and defiant. More like children, playing at masquerade and wanting to be believed.

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But this man was no child. He gave the impression of one holding a charged wire and unable to let go—limbs rigid, mouth clamped, eyes fixed like blue marbles.

The cut of his silver-buttoned *Salzkammergut* jacket proclaimed him a villager from Mondsee, Dr. Moeller's own district near Salzburg. Perhaps, if the man balked at hearing his name, he might respond to some other familiar thought.

"Where is your home, my friend?" Dr. Moeller asked.

"Greater Germany! "

"I merely wanted to know," the doctor said, unperturbed, "whether you come from the Lake or the mountains."

"The liberator does not live in the lowlands. High on Obersaltzburg, Hitler built his hut! "

"Hut? " Franzel snorted, speaking for the first time. "It's a palace! " Dr. Moeller's eyes narrowed in warning, and his assistant, abashed, crawled back into his silence.

The chief psychiatrist went on and his voice was starting to grind a little, like a record long played.

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"You have a wife? Children?"

"Hitler has no wife!"

Hitler—Hitler. Dr. Moeller was beginning to understand.

He paused deliberately, lowered his eyes to the typed report forwarded from the hospital at Linz. He saw lines he had not absorbed before. . . .

"Braun has been a member of a secret Nazi bund . . . Braun has been imprisoned . . . Braun has delusions. . . ."

"You are interested in . . . in politics?" Dr. Moeller probed cautiously.

"Liberty—not politics!" The man's voice skidded upward accusingly. "You! Why are you not in the party?"

Dr. Moeller shivered, but the window was closed. He knew then that he was afraid. The man knew he was not in the party? A spy sent there to goad him? Perhaps those omniscient Nazi ears had even listened to his anguish in the park . . . or read his mail—or the hurt on his face. They could do those things. Perhaps—but, of course! He realized it now—he had not returned the "Heil." That was how the patient had known. The blood in his veins slowed down and he spoke again.

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"Do you consider that you are here unjustly? Would you rather not be here? "

"Yes, yes! " Braun snarled, edging around the desk. "The enemies have driven me out! There was blood on the streets, and men like you lay flat."

"But I am not your enemy. I am your friend."

"You think I am insane! "

"Certainly not." Dr. Moeller's face was expressionless. But behind the mask he was relieved. The patient was beginning to follow the formula of countless paranoiacs before him. And, as always, the doctor's answer had its effect. Braun was tripped in stride. He faltered, mouth open, and sagged into the long-waiting chair.

"You admit I am not insane? "

"It is an unpleasant word," Dr. Moeller said. "And of course, you need not stay if you are unhappy." #

"You mean I can go? "

"Yes."

The patient's dark face was suddenly agape, like a child who sees a toy balloon pop and vanish in his hand. His weird blue eyes strayed from one doctor to the other. There was mistrust in his gaze, pugnacity in the jutting sling of his jaw.

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He was waiting for abuse, for forcible restraint, an animal that fears taming, but wants to be mastered.

"Perhaps," Dr. Moeller said, "you would like to have me go? "

"No," Braun answered quickly. But he jerked his head around toward Franzel. "You go," he said, pointing. "You go! "

The patient was responding, and the young assistant smiled significantly at his superior. Then Franzel stood up without another word, just as he always did, stepped softly to the door and went out. It was then that Dr. Moeller felt the heavy press of the hours against his back. He was tired. Routine, welcomed like an old friend after the nightmare of the Ringstrasse, was spoiling intimacy by stealing his deepest thoughts. He looked across the desk at Braun. The man was coming to life. The wax was melting from the sculptured mould of his face, baring the cunning frame beneath. There were only two men in the office now.

The patient leaned his elbows on the shining surface of the desk.

"You ask me who I am," he said suddenly. "You *know* who I am! Germany awakes! We

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trample those who block our path. One nation, one Führer! ”

“ Yes, yes,” Dr. Moeller agreed, astonished at the fury of the man’s emotion.

“ You know your master.” Braun was laughing now. His lips stretched back over his teeth. He was laughing, but Dr. Moeller had heard such sounds before. The button with Franzel’s name loomed large and close. He could push it. But he could also wait . . . as long as he dared. Braun was shouting again.

“ You are cowards. All of you! Stupid intellectuals must go. We burn your books. Your churches. Your stores. You are afraid, like your Dollfuss who ran until we shot him down. You quaver like your Schuschnigg. He was down on his woman’s knees, weeping to me——”

Dr. Moeller was out of his chair, forgetting his role.

“ To you? ”

“ Yes, to me! The Führer! ”

The psychiatrist shuddered. He had met Jesus. He had admitted Napoleon, Frederick the Great. This was something new! He struggled to keep patience from being swallowed in the whirlpool of the man’s words. He was confronted with the

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delusion itself. It filled the room. But it was more than the torture of a madman's mind. It was taking shape, a monstrous thing with a voice. THE Voice! The shouting, whining, hysterical tongue stabbing all Europe. It poisoned the Press. "Heil Hitler!" It rolled through the streets. "HEIL HITLER!" It thundered from the radios. "HEIL HITLER!" Dr. Moeller pressed his fingers against his temples.

Braun babbled on—The Voice. "We follow our flag. We lead our youth. We need no God. No Christ! No Pope! Our knives are sharp. Blood runs over our wrists. Your women——"

"Stop it! Stop it!"

Dr. Moeller was bursting . . . but the Voice went on. The words that spilled from the throat were black and rotting.

"Your women. We do not like their talk. We beat them. They cry, like this——" The sound rattled and squealed in his mouth. "They cry like little babies. They——"

"Stop, madman!" Dr. Moeller forgot the button on his desk. Forgot his own name, forgot the torn, possessed mind that had slipped from his grasp. The Voice must be stilled. Dr.

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Moeller's fingers convulsed, like legs torn from a spider's trunk. He sprang. . . .

It was some minutes before Dr. Moeller could rouse himself enough to roll away from the body. He pulled up to one knee, rubbed his hand across his bruised face, and tried to comprehend the appalling thing he had done. He looked down at Braun, at the imprint of his fingers on the man's throat. He was flooded with a sense of betrayal to his Oath. He looked toward a framed motto hung on the wall. He was dizzy, lines danced and blurred. But he knew Hippocrates by heart: "I swear . . . I will enter houses for the benefit of the sick . . . with purity and with holiness I will practise my art. . . ."

But Braun had no place in this vow. He was only a symbol. He was the spawn and voice of a dark creed. For the dead man pity and remorse did not exist. They were of no use in hell. There really was no Braun. There was probably no Dr. Moeller. He had come to the blind ending of the street.

And Braun was the luckier of the two, for his exit had been swift.

The Nazis had exquisite means of tormenting

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those they sent to death. Let the Hitler wagon roll up to the door . . . those dreaded Mercedes cars were already infesting Vienna, sleek and black, big cockroaches crawling from street to street. And those snapped up by them were whisked away and never came back. They would come for him, too.

Dr. Moeller was crawling across the floor, lifting his aching limbs into a chair, when Franzel returned. The young doctor stood speechless at the shambles of the room.

"*Heiliger Vater!* Herr Doktor!" he breathed. "What have you done?"

"Lock the door, Erich!" Dr. Moeller cried out in anguish. If only he could put off the inevitable.

Franzel obeyed automatically, and faced his superior. The handsome young face was ashen with horror and fear. Not horror of death. He had seen worse. Not fear for himself, but for the man who was his teacher and friend.

"Erich . . . I had to . . . I had to do it! He was saying things. Erich . . . !"

Franzel nodded. "I understand, Herr Doktor." He moved silently around the office, mechanically picking up a chair that had spun into a corner

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during the struggle, straightening the motto on the clean white wall. "I suppose I should call the police," he said.

"Yes . . ." Dr. Moeller said dully. "I suppose you should."

"We ought to do something."

"Yes . . . of course."

"You are hurt, Herr Doktor. Your face . . ."

"It's nothing . . . nothing."

The two men looked at each other, their eyes deep and flowing with the current of unspoken thought. Two men, friends and colleagues, each knew the other was sparring for time. The events that follow a crime against life—a Nazi life—are as inevitable as the dying of the sun over the Weiner Wald crags each night.

Then, because no sound came from his chief's lips, Franzel's fingers crept around the desk phone and lifted it from its hook. No tombstone, he thought, was ever heavier than this. . . .

"Wait!" Dr. Moeller cried suddenly, pushing away from the desk.

"Yes, Herr Doktor. . . ." Franzel dropped the instrument.

They had been too willing to call the police.

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Dr. Moeller's brain was clearing. There was a chance. . . .

"Erich . . ." He was pacing the floor. "Erich, Braun has no relatives to notify! "

"Are you sure? "

"Positive. It's written in the record."

"And so? " Franzel dared not believe the thought forming in their minds. He could only wait, and listen.

"Erich——" Dr. Moeller stopped short. "I have no relatives either—now."

"Yes, yes . . . go on."

"Braun came here alone? "

"He had one guard. But he has gone back to Linz."

Dr. Moeller lit a third cigarette, inhaled long and deliberately.

"Do you follow me, Erich? "

"Yes. . . ." The thought was overwhelming.

"But, Herr Doktor, it . . . it's fantastic."

"And so is life," Dr. Moeller's voice rang. "So are we all. This thing I have done . . . this man on the floor . . ."

Franzel nodded and his gaze fell upon Braun.

"He does not wear glasses," he said, sobered.

"And you—you have a scar over your eye. They

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might remember those things."

Dr. Moeller smiled grimly. "That can be fixed."

He strode across the floor, plucked up his reading glasses where they had fallen, hooked them swiftly over the dead man's ears. Then, with no loss of motion, he swept up his knotted Alpine stick from its place behind the door. It swung in a high arc over his head. It came down, whistling. Franzel turned away, but he could not shut out the sound. The dead man's face made a little pop, and small bits of glass tinkled against the floor.

"Now——" Dr. Moeller said, panting. "Help me with the clothes."

The sun was high when Dr. Moeller finished, pulling on Braun's hand-knitted woollen stockings and tying the stiff leather thongs on the hob-nailed shoes. His fingers had stopped their fluttering now, and they explored the pockets of the green-banded trousers and the quaint Tyrolean jacket. He found a box of cigarettes, a small metal swastika button similar to one in the coat lapel, a few shillings not yet changed for marks, and the torn stub of an old ticket for the Danube river boat between Linz and Vienna.

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"Erich—tell me, do you think they will see through me?"

"Not unless you talk too much."

"I know—the Mondsee accent. But even that will come back, with practice. And now, just one more thing."

He sat down at the desk, fastened a sheet of Steinhof stationery to Braun's treatment record and picked up his pen. "This patient," he wrote in a large black scrawl, "would be ready for discharge, except for the fact that he still has political delusions based on Naziism."

Dr. Moeller paused and something swelled up in his throat. He had one more brief line to write—words he would never write again. The pen scratched the signature—"Dr. Karl Moeller."

He blotted the paper, stood up and looked out the window for the last time. He saw the clean white bungalows where ill minds could be alone, the silver pines he and Greta had planted a decade before, the chapel and its stained-glass, the recreation court and all the things that made the Steinhof known wherever doctors walked.

Dry-eyed, he turned away from the old and friendly years to face the fearful new. He looked down at the grotesque thing whose filmed eyes

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gaped like dusty grapes, a dead man who had become Dr. Moeller.

"That Moeller was an old fool, Erich," he said wistfully.

"Please . . . Herr Doktor . . ." Franzel spoke softly, affection in his eyes.

"Not that, Erich," the older man chided. "I am Herr *Braun*. My life hangs on your tongue. Herr Braun . . . say it."

"Braun . . . Severin Braun. . . ."

"Thank you, Erich. And now—now you can phone."



CHAPTER TWO



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VIENNA at night was a beautiful woman suddenly aged by terror and conquest.

The once-bright streets were dark channels for the cadence of marching feet; the gay and sparkling cafés now surged with lusting, drunken mobs.

Wherever the Nazis walked, there was death. Friedel, the writer, had shot himself; Chancellor Schuschnigg was bottled up in his home; Nazi assassins snuffed out Major Fey and his family in the Reisnerstrasse; Dr. Nobel, the great physician, carried out a suicide pact with his wife; President Miklas had long since vanished, and hundreds of his citizens had been butchered.

A man named Severin Braun was in a back room of an inconspicuous house on Teinfaltstrasse, once the secret, now the official headquarters of the storm troops.

He had been sitting there, waiting, since they

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brought him from the Steinhof long before dusk, contemplating the paradox that had made a living man of one who should be dead. The body of the battered victim from the Steinhof was already in a refuse truck, bumping to an open hole somewhere in the pine woods beyond Hietzing. They would bury the corpse by lamplight, and the name of Dr. Karl Moeller would be forgotten.

But the fine agile brain of Dr. Moeller would remain alive—in the body of the man now known as Severin Braun. And with that new name life became an inescapable destiny. He saw that there was still a chance to do it—to kill Hitler.

The transition had been swift and flawless.

He could look back now upon its separate frames, like a film in slow reverse, and ponder the exquisite irony that took away his life, and gave it back again. The Sturmführer had said when Franzel pointed at the body: "So that is your Dr. Moeller, eh? Well, we expected to come for him sooner or later."

Brave, loyal Franzel. He had played the role.

The Sturmführer had asked: "What happened here?"

"Ah . . ." said Franzel, with a magnificent shrug, "this poor *Volksgenosse* underestimated

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his strength. And when Dr. Moeller said unwise things about the Führer——”

“Naturally,” the Sturmführer laughed, and his two companions echoed his mirth. “Naturally, Herr Braun did not like to hear treason and took things into his own hands. Is that it?”

“Yes, of course,” Franzel agreed blandly. “I did not think it wise to call the police.”

“Quite right, Herr Doktor.”

“I am sure Herr Braun did not mean any harm. In fact, he might have controlled himself if Dr. Moeller had not written distressing things——”

“Written? Where?”

Dr. Franzel picked up the notation Dr. Moeller had attached to Braun’s report. “This——”

“*Donnerwetter!*” the Sturmführer exclaimed. “I am not surprised there was violence. For an Aryan, your Dr. Moeller,” he said, staring contemptuously at the body, “was a very foolish man. Even more foolish than his Jew wife.”

Braun’s head bobbed enthusiastic agreement. *Jesus Maria!* How the bitterness had surged in their hearts at those words.

“Shall I give you a report?” Franzel had asked.

“Report?” The Sturmführer winked slyly.

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"We do not make reports of . . . shall we say . . . small affairs."

"And the body——?"

"We will have the swine removed. There will be no questions."

"What of the hospital staff?"

The Sturmführer motioned Severin Braun to the door, smiling.

"We will take care of that, too. Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" Franzel said.

And thus they had disposed of murder, in simple Nazi fashion. . . .

The house was a swarming hive that night.

The brownshirts crawled in and out of its doors, gorged and drunk, carrying the gold and silver stolen from pillaged homes and stores. The drone of their voices was the pitch of the Horst Wessel song; they flung it from their throats like an anthem of power and hate:

*"S.A. on the march,
High waves the flag!
The ranks close together
With calm, decisive step. . . ."*

"Calm, decisive step . . ." What mockery,

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Severin Braun thought, these men who never walked, but ran, and always left behind the wound of their heels. He had heard much of the *Sturm Abteilung*, the bastard army created by Captain Ernst Roehm for Hitler's rise to rule. Roehm had been too ambitious and Hitler destroyed him. But the party nourished his litter, and Roehm's men became monsters indispensable in the art of pogrom and purge. Severin Braun was seeing them as they are.

Once, during that interminable wait, he looked through the barred back window, into the yard. He saw two girls, stripped to their skins and held down on the grass by half a dozen strong hands.

The moon threw its light across their white, twisting bodies. The damp ground blottered their little whimpers. And after a while they lay still. Severin Braun didn't turn away until he saw steel *dolch* knives flash, and fasten the girls to earth. They were fluttering their soft wings, like butterflies impaled. They trembled a little, their mouths sucked air, and then there was only the rustle of the night wind. The troopers came in then, and one of them said: "Plump Viennese sucklings know so little of German love. . . ."

The troopers gossiped after that, and Braun lis-

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tened, for there were things he had to learn.

They talked of rape and robbery and how they helped many a "suicide" make up his mind. They told how troopers stormed the mansion of Baron Louis Rothschild and filled up Reich-bound trucks with its millions in priceless treasures of art. They boasted of General Göring's air fleet, of the two hundred bombers that darkened Vienna like locusts and disgorged twelve armed troopers from each fat belly.

"Say, Helmut," one of the brownshirts grinned, "did Göring bring his lion to the Imperial Hotel?"

"*Aber nein*," Helmut laughed. "He had to send to the Leipzig Zoo for a new one."

"What! Again?"

"*Ja*—he had to kill another one. It got too playful and bit a piece from Frau Göring's rosy cheek."

The barracks rocked with laughter and Braun wondered how they dared. He did not learn until later that it was only the neurotic, brooding Hitler who, unlike Göring and Goebbels, flew into purpling rages when jokes were spun around his name. Persecution complex . . . corroding the blood and brain. Braun knew it well, he had

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written its sombre progress into a hundred histories of the mind.

The troopers drank and bragged until the cool hours of the night.

And from his back-row seat in that amphitheatre of victors, Severin Braun picked up scattered fragments of Nazi ideology, of Nazi coups, and stored them away in his mind for future use.

He saw that Naziism is a creed, a consuming religion in itself. It is a doctrine that has no room for other gods, material or spiritual; it is a form of mass hypnosis induced by a master demagogue. Its tenets drip prejudice and passion, its roots must strangle all other growth. It was not only Jews who suffered when the brown tide filmed the face of Austria. Catholics, Protestants, heathens; men, women and children, old and young—all those who, before Anschluss, had voiced rebellion against proposed Nazi rule. All were crushed.

The tentacles stretched across Austria. They could be cut and hacked, but new branches would grow. They would encircle Europe—if the brain lived. The brain, which had already fled from hostile Vienna, was holed up in Berlin. He would have to go there—to kill.

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During this cold baptism into Nazidom, Braun also felt the first twinges of doubt about Franzel. Franzel, who held the key to his life. Braun was remembering scattered fragments that had seemed unimportant in the suspense of that last half-hour in the Steinhof.

They had disquieting meaning now—the Nazi argot that spilled so fluently from Franzel's lips . . . the snap of long practice in his repeated "heils" . . . the easy intimacy in his conversations with the *Sturmführer*. Perhaps Franzel was repaying his friendship and teachings with the gift of life. . . . Braun could not expect help there again. He could never face Franzel. Franzel—appalling thought—might some day succumb to ruthless Nazi codes . . . might even have succumbed already.

"*Donnerkreuz*, Erich . . ." he breathed aloud, "even you could not resist if the Nazis——"

"You were saying something, Herr Braun?"

The voice was suddenly filling his ears, a cold jet. He swung around, looked up into the jowled face of a blackshirt *Sturmführer*.

"Heil Hitler!" Braun said quickly, jumping to his feet.

"Heil Hitler!"

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Severin Braun waited expectantly.

The man before him was stiff and starched in flared breeches, black shirt, boots black and gleaming. His epaulets were studded with little metal stars and oak leaves, and he was wearing a necktie and white shirt beneath the outer black.

And Braun knew he was dealing with a *Schutzstaffel*, or SS Black Shirt Elite, one of Hitler's "chosen" men.

The blackshirt was purring, "You killed a man and——"

"A foul doktor who said——"

"And we have a place for you," the trooper continued blandly.

Braun became rigid. A dozen paralysing thoughts stumbled through his mind. A place—what did he mean? Dachau, perhaps, the dreaded concentration camp whose Warden Erpsmueller once said, "Remember, there are no human beings here, only swine. The more we shoot, the less we have to feed." Lichtenburg Camp, where a Munich lawyer had his limbs pulled from their sockets, one at a time? Sachsenburg, where every cell is provided with a neat noose for prisoners who wish to hang themselves. Or worse still, one of those human garbage dumps in a forest where

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men were mashed with clubs, then swilled into vast graves?

The blackshirt went on. "You want to leave Vienna, of course?"

"*Ja*. Vienna might be uncomfortable." Any horizon was pleasant if it offered life, if the sun would rise each day until he had done what must be done.

"Good. You will leave for Munich in fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes' reprieve. For what?

And so, while the sky still frowned with clouded night, Severin Braun went swiftly out to meet the unknown.

He was aware of many things those first tense hours, sharp but fleeting pictures were embossed on his mind like a tin strip run through a stamping machine. The thundering engine of the Mercedes, shooting them through the night . . . the frozen posture of the blackshirt guards, like ravens on a fence . . . the Alpine villages, red-cheeked children sleeping in the mountains' lap.

Severin Braun had never ridden on Hitler's *autobahnen*.

When he crossed the border at Salzburg, he saw the marvel of those super roads, built with the

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sweat and curses of a hundred thousand men. They crossed the Reich in endless strips, white adhesive to cover the wounds where men cut the earth. There were no crossings, no more towns, and the lane of one-way traffic invited speed.

Once, just before dawn, the blackshirts gestured to a spot a few miles to the left of the road. A thin spiral of smoke was rising there, and it was still dark enough to see lights winking.

"That is one of the secret airports of Greater Germany," one of the guards said with pride.

"*Siegheil*." Braun said it automatically, as all good Nazis do when Greater Germany is mentioned.

"*Siegheil*," the others chorused.

"The Führer is always building." The guard's eyes were bitter, but a professional zeal was cut into every line of his square, blond face.

Yes—building, Braun thought. Building over the bodies of murdered men. Building for war and death while his people shivered in *ersatz* clothes, ate grey *ersatz* bread, lived in flimsy *ersatz* homes. But Severin Braun said:

"Heil Hitler! "

"Heil Hitler! " The blackshirts said it with

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throats ringing. He, too, must learn to do it that way.

The car roared on across the descending hills and the airport lights faded from view. Severin Braun would remember that quick glimpse later, when they told him more about those hidden fields. There were hundreds of them, invisible from the air, inaccessible from the roads. And the sunken hangars of each were swallowing up the planes pouring from German factories at the rate of 1,000 a month.

Hitler was looking toward *Der Tag*. Severin Braun was also waiting—for his own particular *Tag*. . . .

The Mercedes hummed him to his first sleep of exhaustion as they slipped down through the full-breasted Bavarian countryside, and he was still dozing when they pulled into Munich. The black-nosed car glided through a quiet street, slowed near a large mansion.

Three of the blackshirts swung the doors open while the car was still rolling along the kerb, leaped out and ran up the mansion steps without looking back. That cat-like movement was a Mussolini invention designed as protection against possible snipers near the cars. It was typical, too,

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of the speed in the Nazi scheme; they were always hurrying as though time itself yelped at their heels.

In a moment one of the troopers returned, beckoned to Braun. He climbed from the car, stretched, and followed up the wide steps. Another blackshirt was standing in the vaulted hall, a portly, red-faced man he had not seen before. His arm shot up in stiff salute.

"Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" Braun snapped.

This was the Brauneshaus, the original Nazi headquarters . . . Hitler's first gift from rich admirers. It was here that purges were born and fed on bottles of blood.

The Gauführer said Braun was welcome. Welcome? To what? A form of dark mystery in which Death teased in a pleasant voice before cutting him short? Severin Braun wondered, and Goethe's lines rose dusty from a shelf deep in his mind: "Who never spent the darksome hours, weeping and watching for the morrow. . . ."

The Gauführer took him into a room of sombre brown walls and low knotted beams, and ordered him to a table. There were half a dozen other blackshirts clustered round another table in a

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shadowed corner, but they showed no interest in the newcomer.

Their sound was the talk of conspiracy, sinister and hushed. Severin Braun felt the walls squeeze against him. Even the light seemed to come through the windows with shame, for it was thinned and chilled by the dark heart of the house.

A servant brought bottles of *Salvator Bock* and the steins foamed and clinked across the table top. But Severin Braun drank only to quench his thirst, and he was relieved when the Gauführer wiped his lips with a significant flourish and stood up.

"The car is waiting, *Volksgenosse*," he said.

"The car?" Braun echoed.

"*Ja, ja*," the blackshirt leader said testily. "You go on from here."

He had not the courage to question the command, and went silently through the massive front door to the street. The Mercedes was already purring. He had just slid into his seat when three blackshirts came down the steps in double-time and joined him. The car bounded away, its engine bellowing into the breath of a rising March wind.

The machine skimmed through the busy streets,

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past the round-towered Church of Our Lady, past the mediæval Marienplatz. It turned down a narrow side street, slowed for a moment in front of the beer hall where Adolf Hitler had bungled his bloody *putsch* fifteen years before. The black-shirts doffed their caps and there was a softness in their "heils." Severin Braun saluted too. He did not conceive a hero at that *putsch*—but a wild-eyed man with a ridiculous little moustache, gasping and crawling across that same cobbled street with a bullet in his arm. A bullet in Hitler's arm . . . *Gott in Himmel*, Braun thought, why couldn't capricious fate have guided the lead to his brain. . . .

The gears shifted into high, and the old city of Munich was soon behind.

The white road unfurled in a monotonous ribbon all the rest of the day. Long stretches of slick, broad concrete, streaming out beneath the singing tyres, hour on hour. They skirted Nuremberg, where the Nazis hold congress every year. He had been there in his youth and gaped at the instruments of torture in *Schloss Nuremberg*. The Nazis could have taught those ancients. . . .

They followed the *autobahn* across the lush green scalp of the Frankenwald. They rode the

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artery built on banks high over the sharp roofs of Greiz, Schleiz and Gera. And finally, when the day was spent and the hills began to be lapped away by the flat lands, the swift travellers saw the lights and dark mist of a great city. Severin Braun knew it was Berlin, he had known it long before they had passed those other towns. Oranienburg, too, was far behind—then he was not going to a concentration camp. There could be no other destination but Berlin, and what it held for him he could not guess.

It was quite dark when the Mercedes shot down the Avus road to the east gate of the capital, and thence directly to the Prince Regentenstrasse in the centre of the city. There the driver stopped in front of an austere mound of red brick set back from the kerb.

The blackshirts were not so agile now. Their bearing had undergone some subtle alchemy, that changed brisk militarism to swagger, that flavoured tongues with insolence and made eyes shine with power. Severin Braun knew. They were at home. Here the Nazi pulse beat loud and strong. Right or wrong, the voice from their grandstand would always cheer.

Severin Braun was suddenly afraid.

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The blackshirts ushered their hostage into the building and, without pausing in the musty dim-lit entrance-hall, led him up a flight of winding stone steps to the second floor. They went through a swinging door at the left of the stairs, marched down a narrow hall and stopped midway.

"Here is your room, *Volksgenosse*," one of the troopers said crisply, pointing to a half-open door on the right.

"*Bitte . . .*" Severin Braun could hold his tongue no longer, "would you tell me why we are here?"

"So . . ." the blackshirt laughed, "you think you have rights?"

"Of course! I have served my country. I am no pig. I want to be near my Führer."

"Not so fast, Herr Braun," the blackshirt said with a frown. "You will be told soon enough. We have a use for you. You will find out what it means to kill."

"Yes," Braun said pointedly. "Or be killed, against a wall——"

"Careful!" The trooper's voice was low. "You talk too much."

Severin Braun bowed stiffly. "I am sorry."

"*Gut*. You will hear the bell at six o'clock.

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You will be ready when you are summoned. Heil Hitler! ”

“ Heil Hitler! ” he said.

The blackshirt swung round, stalked off, and Braun was at last alone.

Inside the high-ceilinged room his eyes swept round the bare white plaster walls and his blood slowed with the unshakable weight of foreboding. The psychologist realized the disintegrating effect of uncertainty—life or death—and yet he could see no clear purpose in delay. In other Nazi “ trials ” convicted men had been executed at once. Was this strange confinement a new form of mental ordeal? Was someone listening and watching? The Secret Police have never grown beyond the stage of melodrama. Was this the gauge of his brain on the Nazi books? *His* mind? No—the brain of Severin Braun, Mond-see peasant. For his life he must remember to play out that role. . . .

Severin Braun flung himself down on his bed to wrestle with the loneliness of night.

And after a while, when his mind was weary fighting sleep, he got up and went to the broad window that overlooked a lighted court. He leaned out, saw that none of the windows on his

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wing were barred, but those on the other arm of the structure, across the court, were striped with steel. The glare from the yard threw a white splash on them, and he could see gaunt faces pressed against the bars and the night. One after another. Who were they?

Once, during that restless vigil, he heard a shuffle of booted feet on the stone corridor floor. The repeated echo of croaking *heils* filtered through the door, like bullfrogs passing their grunts from pond to pond on a hot summer's night. He left the window, crossed the room cautiously, and opened the little wooden flap in the door. There were brownshirts and blackshirts moving down the hall. Some of them had long, snaking whips in their hands.

There was a flurry of sound and motion in the courtyard now. Severin Braun returned to the window and those weird pale faces were gone from the bars across the court.

But in a moment an outside door swung wide at the lower end of the wing, and he saw them again.

Men and women, prisoners, a hundred of them, came across the court, rags and papers from a refuse can. Some stumbled and fell and the bull-

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whips crackled and writhed around their legs, and they cried out to their God. And there was a woman whose dress was torn from her hips in that first strong lash, and she pawed around on her wrinkled hands like a cat with broken legs.

"*Nein! Nein!*" she sobbed. "*Ich hab nichts getan. . . .*"

The troopers laughed. "You have done nothing? You laughed when the Führer spoke on your radio."

"But I didn't laugh . . ." she cried. "And only my daughter was there. She knew I meant no harm. . . ."

The trooper grinned again and the whip swung out.

"*Ja*, your daughter, a loyal *Arbeitsmaedchen* . . . she puts her Führer ahead of you. . . ."

And the woman became suddenly still and the trooper walked away, for there's no fun in beating a silent thing. Severin Braun looked down upon the swarming yard, and his fingers curled hard round the ledge of stone. And when it was all done the troopers drove the humans through a gate. They were pushed into trucks and the thunder of heavy rolling wheels shook the street until the last one vanished in the night.

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Severin Braun crept back to his bed, and his brain and body ached.

And yet already there was a numbness flowing down toward the vault where once he had kept a heart; the hammer would leave a duller pain with each succeeding stroke.

He could understand the immunity of the storm troops, put through cycle after cycle of lust and hate until they were conditioned against pity and all the softer human emotions. These were not the gentle German people he knew. They were living in an unending spray from the Hitler-Göring-Goebbels faucet and it froze their blood. It would happen to him, too. He used to tell his patients, "you can be what you want to be . . . you can be happy if you have the will. . . ."

It was the crudest form of psychology, but it worked miracles for unstable minds. And now he saw a whole nation under mass hypnosis, floundering above the truth on stilts built by the Voice. If Hitler told that nation black was white, it would believe. Hitler had already taught the new Nazi virtues—murder, robbery, rape. He had said unmarried love was legal—if the lovers made enough babies for future storm troops. He taught them "there is no God but Hitler," that

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Jesus was "the source of all ills," that blood and might and guns could rule the earth. He had taught them—and they believed these things.

Severin Braun stared at the dark ceiling and soon the morning made it grey.

The barracks bell reverberated through the brick fortress at exactly six a.m. And Severin Braun, jerking upright and trying to focus his burning eyes, realized that he must have fallen asleep just after the night started streaking light.

He was sloshing his bristled face with water from a crude washstand when the iron door swung wide and a young blackshirt came in.

"Heil Hitler! "

"Heil Hitler! " Braun echoed.

"Hurry," the youth said. "You will be too late."

The grim humour of it brought a half-smile to his drawn mouth. Late for his own execution? Is that what they meant? He wiped his dripping cheeks quickly with a crumpled handkerchief and pushed back his unkempt hair.

"I am ready now."

"This way," the youth said brusquely. "District Leader Haller of the *Schutzstaffel* is waiting."

They strode down the long hall and their heels

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made a heavy, hollow sound against the stone.

At the base of the stairs, where the flow of troopers through the arched entrance was thick and pressing, the blackshirt stepped briskly through a narrow passageway and opened an office door. Braun stepped inside, the door closed behind him, and he was left alone. But presently, as his eyes became accustomed to the glare of the large, almost unfurnished room, a second door swung wide, and suddenly he was looking up into the dark cadaverous stare of a massive blackshirt. The man's chest dripped ribbons and medals. And the brand of Prussia was on his face, in sword scars ridged across the cheeks. Severin Braun clicked heels by instinct.

"Heil Hitler!" he snapped. He was fast learning how to bark that imperious hail.

"Heil Hitler!" The district leader said it without saluting. "Sit down."

He pointed to a plain pine chair pushed against the wall, and Braun backed into it. He was beginning to sweat.

"Severin Braun," Haller began abruptly, "you have strangled Dr. Karl Moeller in Vienna."

"I would kill again!" Braun said quickly, half rising. "Heil Hitler!"

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"So you like to kill?" the leader asked casually.

"I will kill again!"

"*Sehr gut!* You may get that opportunity."

"You mean I——" Severin Braun's tongue was strangely a-swell and his stomach surged toward his throat. What monstrous derision lay in that one priceless word? The man was toying with him. He must be. And yet——

"Listen, Severin Braun," the leader's voice was steady. "We need men like you. Men who are not afraid to kill. We know all about you."

He inclined his head toward a desk, and Braun's widening eyes recognized a familiar document. The report from Linz! *Himmelkreutz*—these blackshirts left nothing undone! He wondered—and his temples throbbed with the thought—how much did they really know? "You have already demonstrated the dexterity of your hands," the leader continued with an artful smile. "What else do you know?"

"What else do you wish?"

"Can you shoot?"

"A rifle—yes."

"You've used a dagger?"

"Yes," Braun answered grimly. He could practise.

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"Very well," the leader nodded. "We may find a place for you in the Special SS."

"Ah . . ." said Braun involuntarily.

The leader beamed. "You have heard of our talented boys? "

"Who hasn't? "

"If you are fortunate," the blackshirt half whispered, "you may be picked for our little clique." He scrutinized him. "In spite of your age."

Severin Braun trembled a little, and the leader marvelled. He had never seen a recruit so stirred.

"I would risk death," Braun volunteered, "to be close to the Führer. . . ."

"And sometimes you *will* risk death," the leader said gravely. "The guard must always stand between the Führer and those who seek his life. It has been tried, and if the guard had not been alert——"

Lieber Gott! A hundred guards protecting one Führer—and so few who dare try to save the Fatherland.

The leader started for the door.

"Return to your quarters," he said, once more brisk. "Wait there for further orders."

"I can join to-day? " Braun asked hopefully.

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"Perhaps. We will try you in the firing squad. Then we shall see. Heil Hitler."

"Heil Hitler."

Severin Braun went slowly back to the bare second-floor room. So that was it—they wanted him because he had murdered a man. They had classed him as a congenital killer, a man of stone who placed no value on human life. And they had brought him to Berlin because here there would be no friendly face to warm his blood, and he could murder with impunity.

It was an old Nazi trick—never allowing storm troops to ravage their own lands and homes. No—they were shifted from place to place so none would weaken under the scorn and shame of a neighbour's eyes. There was no place for sentiment in the Nazi code. . . .

So they had drafted him to kill?

Very well, if that's what they wanted, they would get it. Severin Braun would kill. . . .



CHAPTER THREE



CHAPTER THREE

SEVERIN BRAUN'S mind was quickly dipped into the font of Nazi Kultur.

It was an immersion so deep and violent as to drown compassion, horror and shame. There was an anthem of spitting guns. There was prayer, from doomed men. And the consecration had only three sharp words: Ready—Aim—Fire!

It began the second morning after his arrival in the barracks when they summoned him from sleep at five o'clock with a sharp rapping on the iron door. He arose quickly, as they had told him to do, slipped into the new black shirt, the stiff breeches, the gleaming boots. He thought it such a simple thing, as this sort of fusion often is; yesterday—a culprit who had wronged the Reich, to-day—salvation in the wearing of the same dark cloak he had feared and despised.

He leaped out in front of the door, standing impassive and cold minutes before others stepped

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into the hall and became a marching line of men. There were twelve—two of them, new to this business, silent and sombre like himself. The others were ruddy, happy men about to do their daily chore.

“What’s the matter, *neuer*?” one of them said to Braun. “Your coffee comes up?”

“Not a drop of it,” he snapped.

But perhaps it would. How could killing be a patriotic joy when those who died were men whose faces he might have seen before, who had sung and laughed and grown up on the German soil? Men who asked for nothing but the right to speak and think their thoughts.

The sky was dipped in grey and blowing wet when the squad climbed into the inevitable Mercedes cars and drove away. They rode for miles through the slowly stirring city, left it at the far western rim, and shot on into the suburbs.

They were in Lichterfelde now, and Braun vaguely remembered the district. It was here in former decades that Germany had trained her army officers of rank, and the cadet school had once been a proud and reverent structure where soldiers learned the arts of war.

But its halls had long since gathered dust and

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its grounds were now an abattoir where citizens were done to death.

It was still quite cold when the blackshirt squad rolled through the gate, stepped out of the cars and marched across the dew-filmed yard. They took up their posts and the adjutant brought them guns and made his customary speech.

"Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" It had a sullen tone when it came from twelve throats.

"I give you each a gun," he said. "But only eleven are loaded. One of you will shoot a blank."

Severin Braun's lips twisted a little at the subterfuge. Why try to trick a mass conscience already sieved by the holes of new and countless graves . . . ?

"You will be given new guns after each round," the adjutant was saying. "You will not speak. You will fire on command. You will aim for the heart or head. It would be embarrassing," he added with a dry little laugh, "to miss a vital spot."

And so rose the dark curtain of death.

The targets stumbled out of a door close to the wall, like wraiths drifting and choosing a spot to

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cling. One after another, pale creatures who had long since lost their fear.

Ready. . . . Aim. . . . Fire!

They sank to the reddening earth as though it were a pillow to rest their pains.

Ready. . . . Aim. . . . Fire!

Some of them cursed the Führer until a bullet silenced the taunt.

Ready. . . . Aim. . . . Fire!

After they dropped, the wall was pockmarked with bits of flesh.

Ready. . . . Aim. . . . Fire!

The warm red stream crept lava-like across the ground. Its fresh, raw smell came back on the wind. It caught up Severin Braun, stained and flamed his impotent brain, rushed and swirled him along and sucked him under its flow.

He began to hate those shuffling, defiant men who faced his gun. They were enemies of the Reich—why not? Aim for those unblinking eyes. Aim for the scornful lips. Smash them. The man beside you has the blank. Your muzzle spits to kill.

Ready. . . . Aim. . . . Fire!

They bumped and hauled the bodies to a huge, makeshift kiln after each round, and turned them

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back to dust in a roaring flame. The fume and stench of burning flesh hung over Lichterfelde like the breath of pestilence, and the citizens of the suburb closed their windows and hearts against the sound and smell. And when it was all over, the blackshirts poured indiscriminate ashes into boxes and mailed them to ruptured homes.

But sometimes things went wrong. And it was on this April morning, when Severin Braun first donned the black vestments, that he learned the exquisite refinements of Nazi style. He was just lowering the hot barrel of his gun after the last round when a Mercedes streaked through the grounds and stopped, skidding, where the troopers stood. A moustached blackshirt jumped from the front seat, and his medals tinkled as he strode across the soft ground and saluted the adjutant.

"You have a man named Wilhelm Stahl on your list?" the newcomer growled.

"One moment, Herr Bannführer," the adjutant said, running a nervous finger down a crinkled paper. "Yes, here it is. But——"

"What was his crime?" The Bannführer was impatient.

"Why . . . he was sending money out of the Reich. He deserved his punishment."

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"Punishment? You mean——?"

"Of course," the adjutant shrugged. "He was shot an hour ago."

The Bannführer's face was a portrait in dark rippling shades. "*Ach, Gott!*" he exploded. "There'll be the devil to pay for that."

"But the man was tried last night," the adjutant said, abashed. "I was there. He was guilty."

"He had counsel?"

The adjutant grimaced uncomfortably. "Well . . . Herr Bannführer," he said, "you know how these trials are."

The officer knew. "Yes, yes, of course. But Stahl—he said nothing?"

"*Jawohl!* He had to be quieted. . . . General Göring himself ordered him taken away."

"The General?"

"*Ja*—he was the jury. But Herr Bannführer . . . I don't understand. Is there——"

"There is!" the officer answered dolcfully. "You have shot the wrong Wilhelm Stahl."

"*Himmel!*"

"It is a pity. He was a good party man."

The adjutant took off his cap, wiped the inside band, put it on again. "Well?" he said.

"You have the ashes?"

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"Of course."

The other rubbed his chin. "There must be something we can do for the family. Ah—I have it. Instead of mailing the ashes, we will have them delivered personally, with our official regrets."

"And flowers?" The adjutant smiled.

"By all means."

The two officers snickered and the blackshirts picked up the sound, and in a moment they were laughing until the tears rolled from their eyes. And Severin Braun caught himself thinking that it was terribly funny, like having your pants drop off in the street, or falling in the mud with your Sunday clothes. And he laughed louder than all the rest at poor Wilhelm Stahl, who got shot by mistake.

He was shaking so much that the adjutant called him over and said:

"You take the ashes to his house and tell the good *Frau* we are sorry."

"Ja," a trooper grinned. "The ashman will charge her extra this week."

"Ha, ha," said Braun. "I'll tell her. And I'll get the flowers."

Then Severin Braun, with the carton of ashes,

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was driven away in a car to the house of Wilhelm Stahl. And that was how he came to look deep into the eyes of Germany, and what he saw was frightening and full of scorn. He had a pretty speech all planned; he was going to tell the men at the barracks all about it, and they would laugh again. But you can't talk to a grieving woman who stares mingled pity and contempt, and the flood of her hate makes water of your blood. He felt it hit him like a sheet of fire. He was suddenly white and sick, even before she ripped the flowers and hurled the torn petals into his face.

He stumbled down the steps and fell into the car, and Frau Stahl began shrieking. Only when he was far down the street could he hear his thoughts again. Then he was calm and his brain was telling him not to care. Something was dying far down inside . . . why worry over Wilhelm Stahl. The man was a fool without luck . . . he was better off dead. They shot him. *Jawohl!* Severin Braun's bullet shot him. . . . But that was not what he had come to do in Berlin—to take the lives of Wilhelm Stahls. There was something . . . something important. Yes . . . to kill Hitler! Hitler, creator of all this . . . to kill Hitler.

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The sun was sticking thin reddish fingers through the barracks room window when Severin Braun awoke. He had come home—it *was* home now—some hours before, when the adjutant dismissed the squad for the day. He had slept, with a weariness far heavier than anything that might have thrust itself against the cells of his body. And he knew, with the conviction of despair, that he was marching himself toward a chasm into which he would have to leap.

There was a veneer, spraying fine but solid over his once warm pulse. And soon it would move sluggish, and he would become the parrot of his fellows, no matter how counterfeit the role. Hope whispered that he could carry it through without succumbing to the Nazi disease—experience shouted back that no sensitive brain could long reject the virus. And will-power sat in the middle, waiting to be told which way to go.

If this were only a day. . . .

But there was to-morrow, and more to-morrows. They would have him firing the gun again. They would have him murdering men and women in their homes. They would have him burning books, looting stores, spying on his fellows, seizing property. They would tell him to search the

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streets for homosexuals, men who sin because they fail to breed. They would tell him to listen for treason from the mouths of the people. They would draft him for pogrom and purge and all the high crimes privileged for SS men. Chief Himmler told them, "you may shoot anyone who offends, without fear of punishment."

He must do all these things. And there could be no failure, for they would read it in the slow shift of his eyes, the curl of his lip. And one day they would invite him back to Lichterfelde, and one of the guns would be blank, but the other eleven would do the work. The adjutant would talk to the squad and shake his head, "nice fellow, that Braun, but he was guilty all right." He wondered if he would be afraid—if there would be enough blood left in his body to spoil the clean smell of the wind.

Severin Braun looked at his watch. Five o'clock. He got out of his cot, dressed and went out for the evening. He had glanced at himself in the mirror, and the reflection was good. And why not? He was a blackshirt. It was pleasant being a blackshirt. You can walk along the street and the people smile. They smile until your back is turned . . . how could they know

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he was a friendly blackshirt? How could he tell them that he had vomited that morning after he'd killed a dozen men? He couldn't. Severin Braun would never vomit again. He was initiated now. Of course . . . blackshirts are taught to do without a soul. They are unlike the Reichswehr soldiers, unlike any men of war. Why, the soldiers had been known to help old Jewish women out of burning homes. Their discipline was the armour of the weak.

But the black and brown shirts were different. They came from the farms, from offices and stores. They knew the beauty of power, the weapon of fear. Heil Hitler!

"Jesus, Maria und Josef!" Severin Braun cried out suddenly. "What am I thinking . . . ?"

And a voice whispered back at him, "You're a Nazi . . . a Nazi . . ." and he tried to drown it with deep gulps of the night air. He was suddenly conscious of the fact that he was still standing in front of the barracks. There was a stream of blackshirts pumping in and out of the red casern, like new and used blood valving through the heart. He turned away and hurried down the street, walking fast and hard.

He paced the broad streets for hours; he saw

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many things . . . the signs in some shops on Friedrichstrasse: *Jetzt Arisches Unternehmen*, proclaiming that Jews no longer owned its stock . . . the once beautiful avenue, Unter den Linden, with only the bleached nude stumps of its majestic trees . . . the Wilhelmplatz, where the Nazis amputated other trees so the people could see the Führer when he spoke from the old Chancellery. He came upon bookstore windows swollen with the best seller—Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The Nazi bible was always centred, framed with evergreens, and lettered cards boasted its incredible four million sale. Best seller, indeed, Severin Braun thought. A home without *Mein Kampf* could be quite distressing if the black-shirts made a business call.

He came upon old streets with new significant names—Adolf Hitlerplatz . . . Wilhelm Göringstrasse . . . he came upon museums and libraries whose stolen treasures now adorned high Nazi homes. News-stands displayed Goebbels' paper, Hitler's paper, the Nazi papers. Children marched home from meetings, miniature brownshirts squealing "*heil*"; churches whose ministers were disintegrating in concentration camps. And finally, because Berlin was a nostalgic stranger

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who could only talk of sorrowful things, he returned to the barracks and restless sleep.

The months rolled on and Severin Braun's mind slowly became a Hitler album.

It was lanky Fritz Rheiner of the firing squad who told him about the several attempts to take the Führer's life. About Julius Schreck, the party chauffeur who shot Hitler in the arm, and was never seen again. About Kummer, the pilot, who had an appalling scheme to take the Führer aloft and hurl him from his plane. The Führer, they said, saw the plot smouldering deep in Kummer's eyes, and refused to fly that day—and that was the end of Kummer. There was the shrieking peasant in Mossrein who threw a pitchfork at the Führer's car, and the Munich banker whose pistol aim was bad. Who was this Hitler that he could not die?

"The Führer will know when his time has come," said Fritz. "He always knows what destiny plans." He was a real Nazi, this Fritz, and believed these things.

They were sitting in the musty barracks room, comrades now, and these were long evenings when conversation helped to hurry the slow fingers of the clock.

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"Tell me, Fritz," Braun asked. "How does he know?"

Fritz smiled indulgently, as if the question had no point. "Why, Baroness Ruck will tell him, of course."

"And who is she?"

"So——?" Fritz looked aggrieved. "You don't know?"

"Of course not. In Vienna we don't hear——"

"Oh . . . I had forgotten." Fritz nodded to himself, leaned his chair against the white-washed wall, and his bony fingers fumbled with a cigarette. "Well, Severin," he said, "many years ago, before the great call came, the Führer was working at a castle in Silesia. One day he injured his hand with an axe, and the mistress of the castle came out to bandage the cut. She looked at his hand, and there was a strange, awed expression in her eyes. And she said, 'I don't know who you are, but some day you will lead Germany from the wilderness.'"

"And that woman was Baroness Ruck?"

"Yes. She was a great psychic, as many Silesians are."

"She lives in Berlin now?"

"Yes, the Führer never forgot what she said."

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And he summoned her from her castle the day Hindenburg made him chancellor. He has not made a move since without her advice—and she has never been wrong.”

“Amazing!” Braun breathed.

“And divine,” said Fritz fervently.

But behind the mask of his blackshirt role, Severin Braun knew it was more than amazing or divine. It was the distorted focus of a fanatic who, unable to be rational in his own furious emotionalism, turned to astral worlds for help. Severin Braun was stunned and bitter at the thought that perhaps a woman was the hidden voice behind the throne, and that Germany's problems were being solved by her psychic whims. How could a sane man rule a nation if he had to go beyond the human mind? But was Hitler sane? Severin Braun's memory went back to the Steinhof and some of the patients he had tried in vain to cure. The paranoiacs, with their delusions of grandeur, their inability to absorb humiliation, their superstitions and bursts of tears.

They were sexless men, repressed, unstable—and they sought compensation in sadism, belligerence, and lust for power and blood. They were all

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Napoleon, Cæsar, Ghengis Khan or—God forbid—Hitler. Yes, they were Hitler. And Hitler, in turn, was a fusion of them all.

How blind his people were.

Why, only eight short years before, a brilliant scholar had written: "Hitler is an unimpressive figure. He looks like a Moravian travelling salesman, with a Charlie Chaplin moustache and a vacuous face. The people will never support such patent foolishness as Hitlerism." What frightful irony—the "patent foolishness" was now filling up cemeteries and breaking a nation's back.

Severin Braun was finding more and more motive for the deliverance he must effect. He had already lost his name; he was losing ruth and soul. He was a number, an instrument. . . .

"Fritz," he said casually, "the Führer certainly has wonderful protection from those who seek his life."

"*Ach, ja!* The SS Special-Standard-Hitler sees to that—the pick of the whole *Schutzstaffel*. Haven't you ever noticed how they surround the Führer in public, facing the people and watching constantly?"

"I've never seen the Führer," Braun said apologetically.

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"A great pity, Severin. But I suppose you will soon. If you could get into the personal guard——"

"I'd give my right arm——"

"Yes," Fritz laughed. "And you might lose more than that. If anybody's going to be shot or bombed, the guards will get it first. No one gets too close to the Führer."

"But those pictures of him in public, surrounded by women and children?"

"Oh, those . . ." Fritz grinned. "They're just for the propaganda. The personal guard has searched all the women first. Even the people with him in the newsreels are hand-picked. And anyway, only one man in Germany is allowed to be near the Führer with a camera."

"Who is that?"

"Heinrich Hoffman," Fritz answered. "Perhaps you will meet him some day. Very few people know that he is the Führer's closest friend, the only one he trusts."

"Fritz, you know everything."

The big blackshirt leaned forward and whispered. "I knew Hoffman when he was only a photographer on a Munchener newspaper. He was with the Führer even before the *Putsch*. He's

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rich now, thanks to the hundred thousand pictures he's taken of the leader."

Severin Braun strolled across the room, took a pipe from the inside pocket of his dark overcoat.

"Fritz, you ought to be in the personal guard."

Fritz's blond eyebrows went up sharply and he gave Braun a sidelong glance.

"There are two reasons," he said pointedly. "It isn't healthy——"

"Dangerous?"

"More than that. It's the unhealthiness of living with a hundred men. Eating, sleeping, walking with them. Afraid of their own shadows. They are just numbers, who dare not have thoughts. They watch the Führer, and the Secret Police watches them. Why, even if one of them wanted to kill the Führer——" Fritz paused, astonished at his temerity, and crossed himself. "Well . . ." he went on, "it would show on the face, in the eyes. And soon there would be one less guard."

Severin Braun sucked deep on his pipe, and the smoke swirled and spread, like his own thoughts. He knew the psychology of fear and suspicion too well. . . .

"And the other reason?" he said aloud.

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Fritz Rheiner lowered his voice and looked instinctively at the door, and the open window.

"Because," he said almost inaudibly, "even I might be picked for the doubles."

The doubles! The men who double for Hitler. Some said there were four. The fiendish brilliance of that strategy confirmed the weird genius of the malcontent who ruled the Reich. Men who look like Hitler, talk like Hitler, take his place in public. Severin Braun nodded, and it was sheer tribute that made him say: "Heil Hitler! "

"Heil Hitler! " Fritz echoed, mystified.

"Where do the doubles come from?" Braun asked, holding the thread.

"Why, they're chosen from the SS Special Standard," Fritz answered reluctantly. He was a little frightened now, and conscience was rolling like a hot iron across his tongue. Severin Braun studied his comrade's face and he saw the changing flow of blood in the cheeks, and his professional training whispered a warning.

"Well," he said lightly, "I hope I can see the Führer soon."

Fritz smiled, obviously relieved. "That's not so difficult. You can watch him at the Kaiserhof almost any day. He goes there for tea."

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"But I thought you said he doesn't risk such public——"

"There isn't any risk. Not at the Kaiserhof. Go there some afternoon. You'll see what I mean. And I think it's getting late."

"It is late," Braun agreed. "*Gute nacht*, Fritz. Heil Hitler."

"Good night. Heil Hitler."

The blackshirt stretched, yawned and started for the door.

"Severin . . ." he said, pausing at the threshold. "Not a word of this to anyone, eh?"

Braun shook his head, smiling. "Don't worry. I have already forgotten what you said."

The door closed on Fritz Rheiner, and Severin Braun sat limply on the edge of his bed, exhausted with excitement. He was getting there . . . learning. There were now three definite things he wanted to do, three things he must do. Go to the Kaiserhof . . . get into the SS Special Standard . . . be a Hitler double.

The first was easy, but the other two were enormous hurdles, and his mind was hurling itself against them, throbbing, bursting, long after he crawled into bed.

Several days later, when the opportunity came,

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Severin Braun walked down Unter den Linden to Brandenburger Tor, the gate at the end of the long avenue. He paused a moment at the edge of the Tiergarten's vast green woods, then turned left into historic Wilhelmstrasse. Here was once the core of royalty, the stage for emperors, and the ancient grey buildings looked down sadly on the ghosts of grandeur that would never live again.

But the Nazi heart was very much alive, and along this street its throb was thunderous and real.

When Braun crossed the great square of the Wilhelmplatz, walking slowly, he felt as if the windows of the Nazi offices were a thousand eyes gaping and probing for the dread secret in his mind. The Chancellery was on the right, with the high balcony from which the Führer spoke to his people.

He saw at once that the layout here would discourage even the most murder-minded citizen. The balustrade was so constructed as to reveal only the Führer's head and shoulders, and it would take a modern William Tell with a high-powered rifle to hit the mark. But there was no place for an assassin to hide. The windows facing the square were all Nazi-controlled, and on speech days, he

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had learned, the offices were evacuated and the halls patrolled by blackshirt guards.

When Hitler spoke, the vast square was a steel ring—blackshirts at all exits, blackshirts in a circle under the balcony, blackshirts with their eyes fastened on the windows. And finally, the crowds were peppered with hundreds of *Gestapo*, plain-clothes police constantly moving and listening for trouble and unrest.

Severin Braun went on toward the Kaiserhof at the far side of the now empty Wilhelmsplatz. The great hotel squatted on the corner, crusty and frowning like a dowager whose brood no longer respects her will. For the vaulted lobby where Hohenzollern had often strutted and snarled was a nest for bourgeois Nazis now. Through its stately halls the ex-house painter stalked with his hypnotized, heiling pack.

Braun found the lobby noisy and crowded. But the talk and laughter was not that of guests, and he realized in one appraising glance that most of the men were blackshirts, party officials or *Gestapo*. He recognized several of them, bowed politely, and went on past the front desk to the tea *salon*.

"Heil Hitler," he said to the *maitre d'hôtel*.

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"I would like a table by myself—that one over there by the wall, perhaps."

"Heil Hitler," the tuxedoed official returned. "I'm sorry, that table is reserved. But I have another. This way, please."

Severin Braun shrugged and followed the head waiter as he threaded a path through the crowd. The room quivered with sound, most of it thin and shrill, like the chatter of gossiping jays. He sensed curious eyes on his back, and one or two women sitting alone caught his gaze and returned it wrapped in automatic smiles. And then, as though unseen wires had pulled his eyes in line, Severin Braun saw *him*.

The Führer was slouched over a table in the far dark corner of the *salon*, running soft, feminine hands through the black polish of his hair. There was another man at the table, stiff as a granite gravestone and almost as square and grey.

Severin Braun was impelled to come to a sudden halt, and thoughts bubbled up in his mind like a seltzer bottle uncapped. Why weren't people staring . . . how the man's hair shone, only brillian-tine could give it that gloss . . . this was no "double," no man could imitate the mystery of those mesmeric eyes . . . no wonder he was so

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utterly friendless and alone, for how could anyone be at ease with that nervous, dangerous mechanism, that ludicrous but revealing moustache, that voice that never conversed but always declaimed.

Severin Braun forgot himself and reached for his blackshirt knife . . . it wasn't there, it was back at the barracks with his uniform. Then the head waiter's agitated voice was rasping in his ears.

"It would be better not to stare," the man was saying. "The Führer will be annoyed."

"Yes, of course."

He sat down, conscious of the waiter's frown, and gave the menu card a casual glance.

"Tea, *bitte*. With lemon. And some toast, too, I think." The man scribbled the order on a pad and started to leave. "Tell me," Braun asked, smiling, "does our Führer come here often?"

"Oh, yes," the man said under his breath.

"A great compliment."

"Indeed," the man agreed with a proud little smile. "He comes here for *Mohnstrudel*. He told me once no one in Berlin could bake it like the Kaiserhof chef. In fact," he added, whispering, "he said they couldn't do it better in Vienna."

"You should be proud."

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"We are all proud, *danke*."

"Is that Herr Hoffman with him?" Braun asked on a guess.

"Yes. And a fine man, too."

The man bowed again, and floated away. And Severin Braun, drawn by some lodestone he could not control, turned his eyes back to that shadowed corner. But the Führer's table had seemingly vanished, and in Braun's line of vision was a fat, white marble pillar, one of the many in the *salon*. For a moment he was puzzled, and wondered if the Führer had gone.

But then, twisting slightly in his chair and leaning as far as he could toward the wall, he could see the isolated table again. He looked around the room, and noticed other significant things—the arrangement of tables and chairs behind the columns, the "reserved" tables he was sure would never be used, the strategic position of the Führer's place.

Some of the patrons were unusual, too—quiet, sombrely dressed men who sat at bare tables and kept their right hands out of sight. And now Severin Braun understood what Fritz had meant. For no man could shoot bullets round a curve, no man would even have time to draw a gun



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before *Gestapo* fire would cut him down. This must be *the* Führer.

Severin Braun knew he would have to find his quarry alone. . . .

He sat there, drinking his tea, and the incongruity of the scene was a lesson in the folly of power that stirs suspicion and hate. How typical of the lonely and baffled despot that he must surround himself with guns and men so he can have the simple thing that brings back tastes of vanished youth. *Mohnstrudel* and milk, more sweet and profound than all imperial might. And with it the voices of men and women at banter and play, in truth unreal perhaps, but human sounds he rarely heard.

He could crawl into the Villa Berghof at Berchtesgaden, or hide away in that other sanctuary, fantastic Adlerhorst on the Kehlstein crag. He could conquer and pillage and rule the Reich—but only here watch people live and laugh.

There lay the paradox and Severin Braun knew—if he waited long enough—that Hitler might, some day destroy himself.

He watched Hitler. He watched Hoffman. He studied them as once he had recorded the reactions of guinea pigs on the laboratory bench.

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A woman drifted across the room now, a tall, golden-haired creature whose full breasts swelled against thin silk like soft ripe fruit.

Heinrich Hoffman appraised her with a professional eye, for his own slim wife, "Tutty," was once a beauty contest queen. But Adolf Hitler suddenly nudged his friend, giggled and squirmed in his chair. Severin Braun had seen that self-conscious confusion in sex-frustrated males a hundred times before. It was doubly indicative now, because Fritz had told him that the Führer did not like men who laughed. He would listen only to those who had praise. . . .

He remembered other things now, long filed in his mind.

The extraordinary efforts of Göring and Goebbels to find the master a mate . . . dark, starry-eyed Leni Riefenstahl, who was amusing until they discovered she used the same rapturous gaze on Olympic winners; Frau Winifred Wagner, who rejected the Führer's proposals; and the affair with his niece, Geli, who killed herself.

But whoever became the Führer's wife, Severin Braun wagered, would find her man a tragic fraud who could only talk of love. . . .

He recalled what other blackshirts had said—

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how the Führer delighted to intoxicate his guests and study them as they lost control . . . how he spent fortunes having decorators plan his homes, then filled them with the ugly cushions turned out endlessly by his sister . . . he ranted when his brother opened a Berlin restaurant, and frightened prospective customers away . . . he commandeered Staats Theatre actors to improve his oratory and Brueckner to help write the speeches . . . he became so exhausted in certain public appearances that Brueckner had to hold him up from behind, and how German film cutters clipped that very scene from newsreels in Berlin . . . how he issued orders forbidding citizens to throw flowers at him, fearing they might contain grenades . . . how he nearly fainted when an American woman surprised him with a kiss during the Olympic games, because he thought she had a knife. . . .

These links could hang alone and carry little weight, but strung together they were the measure of the Führer's mind.

Severin Braun, diagnosing, feared and hated the picture he saw. It was far transcending his own small sphere. He was already destroyed, the nerve roots of his body burned and dead. But others were still alive, out there beyond the rim of Berlin.

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Beyond the growing borders of the Reich. The Führer wanted them—and perhaps only Severin Braun stood in the way.

He pushed the teacup away, looked up and saw that Hitler and Hoffman had gone. He summoned the waiter, paid his bill and went out through the lobby to the street. He could breathe there, the hands of evening were cool and fresh against his burning face. . . .



CHAPTER FOUR



CHAPTER FOUR

THERE came an unforgettable week when Severin Braun got his wish to join the SS-Special-Standard-Hitler.

He had earned it with ferocious zeal and robot deeds; he had spied and written reports that sent men to the execution wall. He had beaten men and women, young or old. He had shown them he knew how to kill and have no pity.

This new life was little different. The barracks were just as barren and cold, the faces of his new comrades had the same sallow shade of the tomb, with little laughter on their lips.

But more than this, there was the distrust and contempt of intimacy, bred by inflexible rules that forced a hundred men to face one another morning, noon and night. There were times when Severin Braun regretted what he knew of the frail human mind. It was so easily taught, so brittle and prey to fancy. At night it would burst its

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bounds and hear small muffled voices, and see shadows grotesquely climb the wall. It would hear the shuffle of feet . . . the distant crack of guns . . . the pain and fury of dying men. He would spring up from his bed, and cold drippings would flow down the channels to his eyes. He would swear to himself softly, for the voices and sounds always scampered off and his mind was a monstrous lie. .

Sometimes his senses betrayed him in the day . . . last week he had seen Greta and her new yellow hat, and he had heard her voice. Last night Severin Braun had come and demanded back his name to keep him company in the grave. . . . Yesterday, a man going through a door to Göring's office, a man in black and silver uniform who looked strangely like Erich Franzel. Braun wanted to call out, to feel the touch of Erich's strong hand. But Erich in uniform? Then his eyes caught a glimpse of twined serpents on the shoulder, insignia of the military doctor.

So it was Franzel!

Erich Franzel, here in Berlin, with a new wisdom on his young face. In Berlin, lemon yellow hair and all, serving the cause. They must have sent for him. They could use men like that. But

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why——? Severin Braun suddenly felt foolish and weak—and the vision was gone. . . .

How long could he last?

So there came an afternoon in the spring; another spring, this was, one unbelievable tempestuous year after Anschluss in Vienna. General Göring had sent an order to the barracks for forty men to report at the stage entrance of the Berliner Staats Theater.

"To the Theater? The Special Guard!" the incredulous guard leader said to Göring's messenger.

"The General said it was important."

"I suppose," the leader said tartly, "that they want a real firing squad for *Tosca*. Or maybe they want us to play *Hansel und Gretel* and burn up a witch. A Jewish witch, to be sure."

"You know how the General is about the theater," the envoy said blandly. "He would call out the whole Reichstag if he needed them for a play."

"But I have men here, not puppets—— Oh, well, if the General insists."

"Good!"

At two o'clock Severin Braun and thirty-nine of his mates were on the proscenium of the great

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Prussian Imperial playhouse on the Gendarmenmarkt. They were greeted by Gustaf Gruendgens, the slim, suave director who had long coached Göring in rabble rousing arts. He gathered them in a circle, told them to be at ease.

"It's good to see you, boys," he said affably. "It's always pleasant to meet blackshirts with conscience clear." One of the men chuckled and the enamel of discipline began to crack. "But my conscience isn't clear——" there were others smiling now "—because for the first time in your careers you're going to act."

Severin Braun poked a companion's ribs, and the latter suddenly burst into laughter. And then, as though someone had wired their minds together and thrown a switch marked "laugh," the forty men exploded and filled the house with a bellied roar. So they were going to be actors—they who lived by the cue, who played supporting roles in Germany's national farce. They were going to be actors—the blackshirts whose lives were Playwright Goebbels' lines—"Heil Hitler" . . . "Down with the Jews" . . . "Siegheil!" . . . "One Führer, One Reich!" For the first time, indeed! Ha! Ha! Ha! And it was good to

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laugh. It softened blood congealed, and let them feel the currents of normal life.

"All right, boys," said Gruendsgens. "Here's what you're going to do. . . ."

An hour later, when the rehearsal was done, the tactful director called them together and said:

"I think it would be a nice gesture if you boys took some flowers to Frau Göring, by way of appreciation for this interlude."

"Take flowers?" one of the blackshirts asked.

"Why not?" said Gruendsgens. "She is at home to-day with the General. A fine lady and a great actress she is. I knew her well when she was the General's——" The director caught himself and took a breath, "—when she was Emmy Sonneman," he said.

The blackshirts fidgeted and searched one another's eyes. They drifted off into a corner, talking, and there were no volunteers.

"Oh, come . . ." one of them said. "Who's going to go this time?"

"Hans, of course," said another. "He's the blondest."

"Not me!" Hans blurted. "I've got a date."

"You go then, Walter."

"Can't do it. I'm on duty at the Chancellery."

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The blackshirts paused in their talk and suddenly they were all staring at Severin Braun.

"You!" Hans cried. "You're new in the guard. You go!"

To Göring's home? Severin Braun was suddenly torn with shredded nerves. Would Hitler be there, alone, stripped of the ever-present guards?

"It's simple," Hans urged. "They might even ask you in."

"Yes . . ." Walter nodded. "They'd like you. You look something like the Führer anyway."

"That's so. He does!"

"Go ahead, Severin. . . ."

So it was Severin Braun who went.

He bought eight Madonna lilies in a shop on the Potsdammerplatz, walked quickly across the Leipzigerplatz and came to the imposing three-story Göring town house.

He went past the grinning trooper at the gate and was ushered into the hallway by a second uniformed man.

"Your knife and gun, please," the trooper said.

Braun gave them up, frowning. He doffed his cap, dropped it on a bench, and quarrelled with his churning mind while the maid went in to announce his name. He felt nude and lost with

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his weapons gone, wondered wildly whether someone had set a trap. Perhaps he could use his hands, the fingers trained to kill . . . no, life hangs on too long that way. . . .

"Please . . ." The maid's sharp voice sliced off the thought.

"Danke."

He followed her down the long hall, his heavy boots hammering the waxed hardwood floor. The maid stopped, turned round disapprovingly. "Hush!" she whispered. "You're not on parade here." He gave her a sheepish smile and lightened his step. Soft strains of chamber music came to his ears, as polite and harmless as tea-hour talk. He heard voices, dissonant and sharpened by the softer strokes of the string quartet. And then he stood in the arched portal of a great *salon*, unaccountably ill at ease.

His eyes were first drawn to an enormous painting above the glowing hearth. He knew that immortal canvas—Rubens' "Hunt of Diana." He had seen it in Berlin before. But then it had been hanging in the Kaiser Frederick Museum, and had belonged to the people. It was enlightening to know that Göring's greed extended to the field of fine arts.

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The room was crowded with men and women, an incongruous group that confirmed the Görings' boasted democracy. The General himself, resplendent in brown beige leather, squatting in a vast chair. All he needed, thought Braun, was a warm rock and some bulrushes. Frau Göring, in a robe de style, plumper than her pictures. Von Ribbentrop, Mefisto with a sideline of champagne. Frau Goebbels, without her gnomish husband. An assortment of blackshirts, a civil servant or two, a few unmarried Elsas looking for Lohengrins.

Frau Göring looked up and saw him. She walked toward the door, smiling, and the lilies were hot and wilting in his hands. He clicked his heels, saluted.

"My greetings to you," he said, flushing. "My comrades sent me to tell you we are glad and proud to act in the Staatstheater."

Frau Göring clapped her dimpled hands.

"Listen, everybody!" she called. "He is a colleague. He plays on my old stage. How I yearn for it, even in my happiness." The guests tittered politely and Braun bowed again.

"It will never be the same without you, Frau Göring."

"Clever boy," she said, laughing.

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"The flowers, Frau Göring . . ."

"Oh . . . of course, I'll have them put—
No, wait." She looked over her shoulder, searching the room. "Look," she said softly, tapping his arm. "Over there. Take them to him."

He turned quickly to the group of men round the fireplace. He felt silly and ashamed. He had not really come for his mission, to free his country of murderous imbecility. But only to deliver a few flowers, without dignity or purpose.

"Pardon me," he said. "Which of the gentlemen——?"

"Not there!" she said, a little impatient. "Over there, in the corner. The Führer."

The Führer! Severin Braun was caught off balance. The flowers clung to his hands, stronger than any chains. This was not a man's way.

"Go on," she said. "Give them to him!"

He looked at her, helpless. He started across the room, sweating, and the floor pulled on his feet. Hitler was there, hunched in a corner with his chair against the wall. Alone, head bowed, brooding. Stripped and vulnerable without the guard. The room was broad, stifling. They were watching him, all of them. He could see clearer now . . . he could see—*Heiliger Gott!* There

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was someone else—a child, a little girl. She was standing by the chair, gazing unabashed into the frozen eyes. If only men had children's minds and hearts, to understand mad beasts and men, to face them unafraid. They said that children loved this Hitler man . . . of course, all children trust the simple things. Why didn't she go away? Why did she stay so close? . . . she was climbing to his lap. What was one child to stop him now? One child, when thousands had seen him purge their fathers' blood. . . .

And suddenly he was there, and his voice was a sound he didn't know.

"Heil Hitler!" he said.

"Heil Hitler," said Hitler.

"*Mein Führer* . . . these flowers . . ."

Hitler took the flowers, holding them gingerly by their soggy stems. He made a stiff little bow, then gave them to Frau Göring.

"To the most Aryan mother in Greater Germany——"

"*Siegheil*." The guests murmured it into their coffee cups.

Hitler then pressed the other lilies into the small child's hand. "——and to a future mother of the Reich."

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To a future mother! A child of seven destined in distant years to make storm troopers for the Reich. "Thank you," she said. "And Heil Hitler. Uncle Hitler . . ." she looked up at him, bright-eyed, "what do you say when you thank someone? 'Heil I' or 'Heil me'?"

The Führer turned away, and Göring reached for the child's hand.

"I think, Helga," he said, "that it's time for your governess to take you home."

Severin Braun went out into the light. The black shirt stuck like a plaster to his skin and his mouth was hot and dry. He walked fast . . . faster. He ran. He fled to the barracks, pursued by a thousand torments. . . .

For two days Severin Braun raged at himself, sulked in the barracks room. He told them he was sick and they let him alone. But he was cracking. He recognized it with all the frightening knowledge of his skill. They were laughing at him, who had hoped to save the world from insanity, at his puny dream—the hours, the days, the walls, the sky. Heaven and hell. All laughing at his presumption. The voices in the night, the voices hissing and taunting his ears.

"You think I am insane!"

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He threw the words at that vacant eye where the moon came through. The window hurled them back.

"No! No! . . . it is an unpleasant word . . ."

"Laugh at me!" he cried. "Laugh! I may fail, but men like me move the world toward freedom. No! I must not fail! I *will* kill Hitler. . ."

Could he have talked aloud? Could they read his thoughts? He crept back to the arms of the silent bed, but it was a hard embrace. He tossed and arched and beat his fists against the wilful wall. And finally he slept. The dark river ceased its drowning rush, and his mind began to breathe again.

Himmler came on the third day—arrant Himmler of the *Gestapo*—and Severin Braun was summoned to the barracks office.

"Severin Braun," Himmler was formal and blunt, "the Führer has sent for you."

"For me?" said Braun. "I——"

"No questions! You have ten minutes to prepare. Exactly ten minutes."

So they had found him out after all these months . . . the sand was running thin through the glass. He went slowly up the familiar stairs, and his heart was the roll of a drum. Why hurry

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out to die? "The Führer has sent for you. . . ." A clever man, far more clever than Severin Braun. He must have seen the secret in the other's eyes at the Göring home. He must have been listening, watching, prying—forgetting flowers and a child's small talk. Else why Himmler? Himmler, whose very name was a calling card edged in black.

Ten minutes—how fast the seconds died.

Then he was in a Mercedes again, this time a covered one. How smooth and quiet, these ubiquitous cars, whether running to life or death, and the seat was deep and soft against his tired back. And in a little while—minutes or hours, he knew not which—the machine rolled down the Vosstrasse to the house that Hitler built. Not a house, of course, but a monument reared to the Hitler might. Marble, granite, steel—blood, death, despair. Two orderlies remained in the car. Himmler of the *Gestapo* and Severin Braun, voiceless in prisoners' silence, went up. Ten steps, a massive door. Up more steps to another door.

Down the tapestried hall whose marble blocks were hewn from German mountain veins. Down the endless hall, whose walls rang loud with the beat of two men's marching feet. Down to that

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final door whose eagle shield is bronze and bears the simple crest, "A. H." There were blackshirts on guard. He knew them, but they dared not smile with Himmler there, and the ponderous door swung slow and wide. The door to the Infinite, thought Severin Braun . . .

And Himmler remained outside as it closed on Braun.

And so they met, at last alone.

Alone? The walls must have a hundred eyes, the doors were listening ears.

Hitler's head was down over the colossal desk, and a pen was scratching words. Scratching . . . etching . . . inexorably giving laws to engulf the stricken Reich. The Führer looked up at last and his eyes were bits of sapphire.

"Severin Braun, an honour has come to you."

An honour? If death can wear that badge . . .

"Heil Hitler," said Braun. And what a farce this was.

"Heil Hitler!" said Hitler.

"Severin Braun"—the voice was rising now—"you would give your life for mine?"

"*Ja, mein Führer.*" Until the end of time itself, this petty life he owned. To trade it for that other . . .

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"I like you. I like your sense of duty. You—you can serve me well. To face the crowds—the risks."

Lieber Gott! They had chosen him to be a Hitler double! To play the part of the tyrant, to think his thoughts, wear his clothes. To be so close, to live his life. His life—to *take* it!

The Führer was on his feet, the voice a quavering storm. "——to keep my life. I will teach you to say the words of Hitler. Listen. I, the Führer. I am Germany! We trample those who block our path. They are afraid! "

Donnerkreuz — memory stirring, throbbing mind's womb. He had heard this voice before. Somewhere, far back in the shrouded years. . . . That day at the Steinhof. Stop it, madman. Stop! But the voice went on. . . .

"Germans need no God. No Christ! No Pope! There is no room for God. Or Jews . . . their women——"

"Stop it—Hitler! "

"——the cowards run——"

Severin Braun reached for his knife. It was not there. His gun, too, was gone. His eyes swept the desk. Nothing there. Just beyond, past that twisted face, stood the bust of Hindenburg. Hard,

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solid bronze. The soul of democracy proud and undying in this wild fire that Hitler fed.

The tortured man who had once been Dr. Karl Moeller caught up that heavy bust with strong hands. He swung. He smashed. He hammered.

Hindenburg made you! Hindenburg breaks you!

The blood spurted hot and sticky across his hands. It splashed the book, *Mein Kampf*. It stippled his face. And the Führer sank to the brown marble floor, and Severin Braun's breath was coming like steam from a broken pipe. Let them come now. Let them *heil* their leader. Let them blot the blood.

He fell to his knees, to stare at the leader's face. Someone was coming, heels tap . . . tap . . . tap across the polished floor. He looked up—into the face of Franzel. Franzel was standing there, brave loyal Franzel . . . so it was Franzel he had seen days and weeks before. Franzel, his friend. They could tear off the Führer's clothes, smash his face, change places. Franzel would help . . . the killer looked at him, and said: "Erich. . . ."

But there was no answer. Nothing but sorrow and pity and sublime understanding shaded deep into those warm young eyes. And suddenly Sev-

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erin Braun knew the crossroads were at his feet again, but this time the path of life was blocked. Shut off by a barrier limp and red on the floor. Franzel couldn't help. No one could turn back the rushing tide. No one. But there would be a sweet taste to death. He had done his work. . . .

He pulled himself up to the edge of the desk and searched again for Franzel's eyes. But at that instant Franzel had turned, transfixed, to a door opening on the other side of the room. Franzel's arm rose, slowly, heavily, toward the door. Severin Braun's heart was running down.

"But, Erich . . . for mercy's sake . . ."

Franzel's arm was high, and the door was open wide. At the threshold stood a familiar figure, grim and terrible. Severin Braun closed his eyes, but he couldn't seal his ears, his mind, his heart—his life. He heard Franzel's voice:

"HEIL HITLER!"

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